

# **Democratic Decentralization in the Forestry Sector**

Lessons Learned from Africa,  
Asia and Latin America

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## **I. Setting the stage: Definitions**

- \* Decentralization
  - Administrative: upward accountability
  - Political, democratic: representative, downwardly accountable actors with important autonomous decision-making powers
- \* Devolution
  - Includes the option of non-governmental transfers of power, such as local communities



## **Setting the stage: Goals in theory**

- \* A tool for development
  - Efficiency
  - Equity
  - Democracy
- \* Participation and natural resource management



## **Setting the stage: Democratization/ local empowerment**

- \* Top-down process?
- \* Development with poverty alleviation through livelihood strategies and local empowerment: bottom-up processes (Bill Ritchie, Scotland)
- \* Historical exclusion: “People living in forest areas... have been expected to cope with sometimes drastic limitations...” (Edmunds et al. 2003:5)



## Setting the stage: Goals in practice

- \* Cost reduction
- \* Revenues
- \* Property rights
- \* Government legitimacy
- \* Economic or political crisis
- \* Official rhetoric?
- \* *Increase* central control over forest management (Silvel Elias and Hannah Wittman, Guatemala)
- ▶ The meaning of decentralization: cost-cutting v. securing local livelihoods and building a civic culture for democracy



## Setting the stage: Objections

Failure to implement decentralization as a democratic process in forestry

- \* The “technical objection”: forestry is a technical, scientific enterprise for large-scale, respected logging companies
- \* The “political objection”: political and economic interest groups want to keep things the way they are



## Setting the stage: Yes, but how?

- \* Who should receive powers?
  - What is the appropriate configuration of powers among central government, (state government), local government and local actors, given each particular context?
- \* Goal of this conference:
  - Reach consensus regarding objections: these are not a valid reason to deter decentralization
  - Focus on this institutional question as it should be adapted or suited to local conditions



## II. Lessons learned: Central governments 1

- \* The transfer to local governments of significant, autonomous decision-making authority regarding forest resources is rare
  - No discretionary powers
  - Powers over a small area
  - Powers over resources with little value
- \* Arguments for maintaining control



## **Lessons learned: Central governments 2**

- \* Authority or responsibility is rarely transferred to representative and downwardly accountable local institutions (Jesse Ribot)
  - Branch offices
  - Parallel institutions
  - Traditional authorities
- \* Central governments often block decentralization or manipulate it to their own ends (Ghana)



## **Lessons learned: Local people**

- \* Existing local forest management institutions are often undermined, rather than empowered, through current decentralization strategies (Guatemala)
- \* Decentralization rarely includes effective participation and accountability mechanisms
  - The problem with elections



## Lessons learned: Local governments

- \* Local governments may be representative authorities, accountable to their constituents, or they may constitute another local interest group in competition for forest resources
- \* Local governments often have little *motivation* to take forestry-related initiatives, especially where they have little real authority over, or receive few tangible benefits from, forest resources; when they do, their initiatives may emphasize obtaining economic benefits
  - This may be precisely because they receive few benefits, have little authority and generally have limited financial resources



## Lessons learned: Social outcomes

- \* Decentralization policies have positive social effects when those receiving powers are accountable to local people and when they seek to empower local people
- \* Decentralization policies have negative social effects when they seek to extend state control over local people, when they fail to address equity concerns and/or when those receiving powers are not accountable to local people
  - Downward accountability, however, does not always lead to positive *ecological* effects



## Lesson learned: Other actors

- \* Other actors play a key role: the *will* to make decentralization happen with *the right kind* of institutions
- \* *Central government* oversight is important and necessary
- \* *Forest department* support can help make decentralization work
- \* *Donor assistance* is key to decentralization but can also be detrimental if managed inappropriately



## III. Conclusions 1

- \* Implement democratic decentralization
- \* Multiple accountability mechanisms; electoral processes should allow for independent local candidates
- \* Effective legal recourse at all levels
- \* Representative and effective participation, especially for marginalized groups
- \* Transparent management of logging contracts; clear local benefits
- \* Central governments as effective partners



## Conclusions 2

- \* Forestry as multi-faceted, integral sphere; professionals trained accordingly
- \* Third parties can help raise the voice of local peoples
- \* Elected local governments should build regional associations to address larger scale issues
- \* Who should make what decisions: effective national dialogue with a clear commitment to democratic decentralization
- \* Forestry decentralizations should begin with the local, build on what is already there



## Conclusions 3: Why isn't this happening?

- \* How do we overcome the obstacles, the lack of accountability, the failure to decentralize in favor of the poor?
  - Recognize multiple interests
  - Build a favorable political climate: coalitions, empowerment of local actors
  - Recognize opportunities; use flexible, adaptive responses accordingly; be creative

